

Evaluation of an English as a Second Language Program
to Identify Primary Indicators of Learning Disabilities that Impede Student Achievement

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Abstract

The study is an evaluation of an English as a Second Language (ESL) program at a southeastern technical college. Thousands of adults who enroll in ESL programs are individuals who appear to be intelligent. They have worked diligently for a year or more to learn to speak, read, write, listen and improve English comprehension skills. However, some of these students make little or no progress. In certain cases, ESL instructors often presume some students are affected by learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities may experience problems with one skill or every aspect of learning. ESL programs cannot feasibly provide accommodations to address every indicator of learning disabilities. However, programs may identify the primary learning disability indicators that seem to commonly affect their students and provide accommodations to tackle those issues. The problem is that the ESL program at the college had not been evaluated to determine the primary learning disability indicators that may affect students.

A sample population of students enrolled in the ESL program was randomly selected to participate in the study. These participants responded to a validated student questionnaire. The results from the data analysis of the student questionnaire showed the indicators of learning disabilities that posed the most challenges for participants of the study. Results from the data analysis also reflected the percentages of respondents of the study who could relate to one or more of the indicators of learning disabilities.

The outcome revealed the leading difficulties that may affect not only the participants of the study but also other students enrolled in the program. As a result, ESL instructors at the institution should be familiar with how to accommodate students who show symptoms of those learning difficulties. On-going training may be necessary to provide instructors with updated information on different accommodations that will best fit the learning needs of students who show symptoms of learning disabilities.

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Introduction

Thousands of adults in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs appear to be capable and intelligent. Many have worked diligently to learn English. However, some of these students experience difficulty in achieving expected progress no matter how hard they try. These students may demonstrate great resourcefulness in their lives, but learning English has become a major setback (Academy for Educational Development, Inc. 1996). ESL instructors often presume some students are affected by learning disabilities.

For this study, an evaluation was conducted of an ESL program for adult students. The study was conducted at a technical college which is located in a large, multicultural city in the southeastern region of the United States. The technical institution for which this study was conducted will be referenced as “the College”. The College serves a large international student population from various Caribbean and Latin American countries. The institution provides a comprehensive vocational program along with an adult education program to address the needs of the community. The adult education program includes ESL classes. The classes for ESL learners are intended to assist in developing literacy skills that will ultimately help students communicate in English, succeed in vocational programs, locate and keep a job, and progress in their careers.

Purpose

The study was conducted to identify indicators of learning disabilities that pose the most challenges for participants of the study. In addition, the study was geared to determine what percentage of this sample population appeared to be affected by the learning disability indicators presented on the questionnaire. The study was ultimately intended to ensure that the primary learning disability indicators that affect students in the program were identified so that accommodations could be provided to the learners.

Problem

Learning disability is not a single disorder that affects learners. Students may be impacted by disabilities in any of seven areas such as (a) listening, (b) speaking, (c) basic reading skills, (d) reading comprehension, (e) written expression, (f) mathematics calculation, and (g) mathematical reasoning. Learners are frequently diagnosed with these separate types of learning disabilities co-occurring with one another and with social skill deficits and emotional or behavioral disorders (Lyon, 1996). As a result, students with learning disabilities may experience problems with one skill or every aspect of learning. ESL programs cannot feasibly provide accommodations for every indicator of learning disabilities. However, programs may identify the primary learning disability indicators that seem to affect their students and provide accommodations to address those issues. The problem is that the ESL program at the college had not been evaluated to determine the most challenging learning disability indicators that may affect students.

Definition of Terms

Accommodations. Accommodations are any changes that are made to the way students access information and demonstrate performance. The changes are not intended to modify a program, or give the student with a disability any advantage (Florida Department of Education website, 2006). An example of an accommodation is allowing students additional time to complete class assignments or tests. Accommodations may level the playing field and remove barriers to make adult learners successful.

Beginning Literacy/Pre-Beginning Skill Level. According to the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) website (2009), the listening and speaking functions of students who are enrolled at the Beginning Literacy level are minimal, if at all, in English. These students generally communicate only through gestures and a few isolated words. The reading and writing skills of these

students may not be literate in any languages. Further, the employability skills of the learners are very routine entry-level jobs that do not require oral or written communication in English and in which all tasks are easily demonstrated.

English as a Second Language (ESL). This phrase is generally identified with teaching English in an English speaking country to people whose native language is one other than English. According to Orem (2002) the teaching of ESL to adult learners has always created a significant factor of the larger field of practice of adult education in North America. The need to teach ESL is due to the large number of non-English speaking immigrants who have migrated to the United States and Canada.

Self-disclosing. Self-disclosing is the first step an individual with a disability must take to receive the wide range of accommodations available to them during classroom instruction (Florida Department of Education website, 2006). In order to obtain accommodations, students are responsible for providing the most recent information documenting their disabilities.

Literature Review

Definitions of Learning Disabilities.

A review of literature revealed similar perspectives on the definition of learning disabilities. For instance, learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may be noticeable in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations (U.S. Office of Education as cited on Learning Disabilities Association of Illinois website, 2007). Moreover, learning disability is a general term that refers to a group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities (The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities as cited in Learning Disabilities Association of Illinois website, 2007).

Experts have not been able to pinpoint the specific medical causes for learning disabilities. Gosden Kitchen and Dufalla (2006) provide information that learning disabilities are not caused by economic disadvantages, environmental occurrences or cultural differences. In fact, the National Center for Learning Disabilities as cited in Gosden Kitchen and Dufalla (2006) contends that many times the cause for learning disabilities is not apparent but research identifies some causes as heredity, problems during the pregnancy, injuries after birth, a lack of nutrition or exposure to toxic substance.

Learning Disability Laws.

Laws include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (Grossman, 2001). Cope (2005) reports that the protection of federal law for qualified individuals with disabilities was first provided by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and later extended to all educational institutions by the ADA. Post-secondary education is primarily governed by Title 5 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which is the central piece of legislation affecting public and private colleges and universities (Brackett & McPherson as cited in Beaubien 1999). Title 5 and resulting court decision have requested colleges and universities receiving Federal monies to offer similar educational services and accommodations to prevent discrimination against students based upon disabilities.

In addition, federal and state laws dictate that students enrolled in an adult education program who possess a disability may choose whether or not to disclose his/her disability status (Florida Department of Education website, 2006). So the responsibility lies with students to self-disclose their learning difficulties by presenting disability-related records to instructors, guidance counselors, or disabilities support staff in order for the learners to be eligible to receive accommodations. Once students self-disclose, the learners are responsible for providing documentation prepared by a

professional who is certified to diagnose learning disabilities in order to ensure that the students obtain appropriate accommodations for use in the classroom and on assessments (Florida Department of Education website, 2006).

ESL Students

The age of adult ESL learners may range from as young as 16 years to adults in their 90s (The National Center for Family Literacy, 2004). These students may include permanent residents, naturalized citizens, legal immigrants, refugees, and asylees. ESL students have become a significant part of adult education programs. More than 35 million adults in the United States are native speakers of a language other than English (U.S. Census Bureau as cited in The National Center for Family Literacy, 2004). For instance, in 2002-2003, 43% of students enrolled in adult education programs were ESL learners (U.S. Department of Education as cited in The National Center for Family Literacy, 2004). The foreign born population residing in the United States comes from all over the world, but most immigrate from Latin America or Mexico. Sixty percent of the immigrants to the United States who speak a language other than English speak Spanish.

The English-speaking ability of adults learning English ranges from low beginning, with limited opportunities to use English outside the class, to high advanced, which would be considered near native proficiency (The National Center for Family Literacy, 2004). Over half of the students enrolled in ESL programs in 2002-2003 were placed in beginning literacy or beginning ESL classes (U.S. Department of Education as cited in The National Center for Family Literacy).

Learning Disability Characteristics.

Brown and Ford (2007) note that the difficulties students may experience in learning English are compounded when the learners possess learning disabilities. These difficulties are demonstrated by students in many identifiable forms. For instance, students may have difficulties speaking and as a

result words may be placed in the wrong order. Also, another identifiable sign of learning disabilities is that students may understand questions that are presented through one medium, but the learners do not demonstrate similar comprehension if the same questions are presented through a different medium (Pirie, 2001). Learners may also express a great difference between oral and silent reading. The reading style of the learners may be jerky, choppy, or slow and deliberate.

Participants

Twenty-four students were randomly selected to participate in the study. The eligibility requirements for ESL students were that these learners are (a) 18 years and older and (b) assigned to a Beginning Literacy level class in accordance with state standards for placing students who complete the placement test. All students, who participated in the study, are Haitian immigrants, 18 years and older. Stepick et al. (1984) report that Haitian immigrants are well educated by Haitian standards, so many come with readily employable skills. Some middle and upper-class families come to the United States due to the political turmoil and violence, not for economic reasons (Ibokette, 2007). These students may perform at or above grade level and are very successful. Other students immigrate to this country to escape poverty as well as violence and political upheaval. These students may have attended inferior schools or no school at all and enter ESL classes at below grade level. Nevertheless, the Haitian immigrants possess sound work ethics and are striving to improve themselves (Stepick, et al. 1984). Those who may have economic problems will confront them with practically no help from the state welfare system. Instead, they will rely largely upon opportunities and resources within their Haitian communities.

Methodology

Questionnaire

A validated student questionnaire was presented. The questionnaire consists of 12 closed-ended questions requiring the learners to respond by checking 'yes' or 'no'. The student questionnaire was translated into Haitian-Creole, the first languages of students in the Beginning Literacy ESL class since many are still learning the basics of the English language.

Procedure

Contact was made with the instructor teaching the Beginning Literacy class to obtain the names of the students for the random selection process. The names were written on separate slips of papers, folded securely and placed in a container for the random selection process. The names were drawn from the container until the desired number of 24 students was selected. When the visit was made to the Beginning Literacy class to conduct the study, 21 out of the 24 randomly selected students were present. The classroom instructor assisted in translating to the students, in Haitian-Creole, the purpose of the student questionnaire and the anonymity of the responses. Then, the Participation Letter and student questionnaire were distributed to each participant. The Participation Letter was also presented in Haitian-Creole since students are still learning the basics of the English language. The students completed and returned their questionnaire.

An initiation of the data analysis process occurred with the review of responses from the student questionnaire. Then, data was organized by sorting through the responses and arranging information in terms of the similarity of the responses. Next, key points were identified with a series of color codes representing indicators. The codes were grouped into similar concepts from which eight main categories were formed. The main categories included (a) attention deficit, (b) writing, (c) reading, (d) spelling, (e) organizing information, (f) listing, (g) memory, and (h) comprehension. After,

a count was conducted of the number of responses that matched each of the categories. Then, the data was analyzed to determine the indicators of learning disabilities that pose the most challenges for the learners. The results from the data analysis for the student questionnaire (see Appendix) show primary indicators of learning disabilities that have affected the respondents.

Results

Twenty-one students responded to a student questionnaire that revealed the indicators of learning disabilities that have made learning a difficult experience for the participants of the study. Data from the responses brought awareness of the need for students to self-disclose their learning difficulties since the results revealed that 62% of the students responded that they are affected by reading difficulties. In particular the students mistake one word for another by saying words backwards such as 'was' instead of 'saw'. According to Noble and Mullins (1997) these students are unable to visually distinguish letters and numbers as these characters may appear jumbled or reversed. Another reading difficulty that affects 52% of the respondents is the length of time taken to read a sentence since they read words one letter at a time to make out the word.

Data also showed that the sample population has been affected by writing difficulties. The responses revealed that 52% of the students indicated they are unable to write sentences since they cannot place words in the correct order to get the full meaning. Writing difficulties, also known as dysgraphia, is a learning disability that manifests in a number of ways such the inability to put thoughts on paper (National Center for Learning Disabilities of America, 2006).

Another 48% of participants expressed difficulty in understanding written and spoken instructions, and they require instructions to be explained in an easy manner to help them to comprehend. For 43% of the sample population, they are unable to properly make the shape of letters

to write words. Instructors may accommodate students by providing aids such as alphabet guides, column guides or other writing support.

Only 38% of the sample population admitted that they have difficulty paying attention for a long time in class since they give all attention to every sound and movement around the room. However, this number still indicates that too many learners are affected by attention deficit.

Conclusion

The outcome of the study revealed the reading and writing needs of some learners enrolled in the ESL program. As a result, ESL instructors should be familiar with how to accommodate the difficulties of students who show symptoms of those learning difficulties. On-going training may be necessary to provide instructors with updated information on different accommodations that will best fit the learning needs of students. Continuous training in learning disabilities classroom procedures may be required for all instructors in an effort for the educators to provide certified appropriate instruction and effective accommodations for learners (Schwarz, 2002). Further, Schwarz advises that training is important for instructors because the teaching methods of instructors may not be adequate to assist them with any significant challenges they may face teaching some students with learning disabilities. Training will provide instructors with the knowledge of specialized methods of instruction.

The percentage results of the number of students affected by reading and writing difficulties depict a need for ESL students at the College to recognize the importance of self-disclosing their learning difficulties to obtain assistance. Federal and state guidelines require that students self-disclose their learning difficulties to obtain accommodations. However, ESL adult learner may not be aware of their legal rights to do so. According to Florida Department of Education (2006) institutions have a responsibility to provide new students with information packets that include not only program information but information on the laws, student rights and the policies and procedures provided for

students with learning disabilities. Further, students with learning disabilities should also be provided with the procedures for requesting an instructional and/or assessment accommodation by the institution and this information should be posted. When students are provided with information on federal and state laws, this will ensure that they are knowledgeable about their rights (Florida Department of Education, 2006).

Conducting an evaluation of the ESL program at the technical College was necessary for a number of reasons. First, the responses to the student questionnaire brought an awareness of primary indicators of learning disabilities that impede the reading and writing performances of some ESL learners. Second, the study was beneficial since the findings revealed that a number of students may be affected, and this outcome demonstrates a need within the ESL program to accommodate these learners. These revelations are expected to alert and encourage administrators to take follow up actions to accommodate students who demonstrate symptoms of learning disabilities.

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Appendix

Questions	Yes	No
1. Do you have difficulty paying attention for a long time in class?	38%	62%
2. Do you have difficulty in making the shapes of letters to write words?	43%	57%
3. Do you leave out letters or write wrong letters when copying words?	19%	81%
4. Do you have difficulty writing sentences?	52%	48%
5. Do you have difficulty spelling words?	29%	71%
6. Do you have difficulty reading because you mistake one word for another?	62%	38%
7. Does it take you a long time to read a sentence?	52%	48%
8. Do you have difficulty understanding written and spoken instructions?	48%	52%
9. Do you have difficulty following written and spoken instruction?	38%	62%
10. Do you need more time than others to complete tests?	33%	67%
11. Do you have difficulty in class remembering information recently taught?	33%	67%
12. Do you have difficulty understanding simple verbal communication spoken to you?	48%	52%